

INTERVIEW WITH

ELEONORA FABIÃO

CRISTIANE BOUGER for RELÂCHE – CASA HOFFMANN e-MAGAZINE | April 1st, 2004.

ELEONORA FABIÃO is performer, actress, and Assistant Professor of the Department of Communication at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ. She has been working towards her doctorate degree in Performance Studies at the New York University on a CAPES scholarship.

Relâche: For many years you worked with the theatre group *Centro de Demolição e Construção do Espetáculo* of Aderbal Freire-Filho, and with Ivana Leblon's Companhia *KO Produções*. How did the migration from theatre to performance happen?

Eleonora Fabião: I don't think "migration" is the best word to define what is happening, because I still want to do and think theater a lot, whatever "theater" is, or whatever we want it to be. In fact, I emigrated from Brazil to New York to take my doctorate on Performance Studies and here I became interested on this difficult subject called performance, which is so hard to define. But I think that the KO's scene— based on the actor's dramaturgy grounded on intensive energetic and psycho-physical training—and the work of *Centro de Demolição e Construção do Espetáculo*—a research about "open dramaturgy," a scene you do with the spectator, highly political theater—already pointed to the performance, even if not directly. One way to show what has happened (and still is being processed), is that my stage has exploded—the scene has expanded, it grew, it became bigger. *Alice*, a solo-spectacle based on Lewis Carroll's writings, which I directed and acted on before I left Brazil, was already a hybrid. At a certain moment during the piece, I–Alice–cat–queen–hatmaker–egg asked one spectator 'what he was made of'; after the answer I asked to touch him, and I did. The performance was already there in this action—the touch and specific question.

The fact is, that I found a large and creative space, which includes and transforms the experimental theater that I had been practicing during the 1990s. The name of this expansiveness is performance; the name of this performance is expansiveness.

R: What differs *performance art* from *live art*?

Eleonora: As I see it, the performance in its multiple forms—body art, biographical performance, activist performance, etc— is primarily a kind of live art, although it is also possible to perform by absence or virtually. Live art is the one that happens among people that are alive, based on this "technology" of shared presences. But I do not like these titles and definitions very much—this sells many books, gives names to conferences, festivals and such, but it doesn't say much. I prefer to think about what "liveness" is, about how complicated it is to define what is "live" in art in this time of clone reproduction and of performance on the Internet. I think it is neat to think that what is live generates life, gives life, and that my body is the thermometer to perceive if something is alive and spreading life. I like to approach something and pay deep attention, observe the resonance in and around me. I work with the idea that the performance of subtle, but emphatic way, informs as well as produces body; the performance is a space for the thought and productions of ideas and bodies.

R: During the workshop at Casa Hoffmann you talked about the terminology of the word "performance" in the contexts of Fordism and Taylorism in the USA, meaning its efficiency, efficacy, and effectiveness. Can you talk more about the influence of this terminology in performance art?

Eleonora: Oh the three e–e–e (laughing). Yes, the damned triad, the perverse little triad... The word "performance" has such a broad meaning and a lack of form that it sometimes makes me dizzy. John McKenzie invented the relation among these terms and the performance in the book *Perform or Else*. Let's go by parts.

The word comes from the old French—*parfournir*— meaning "to complete" or "to perform". In English the word comprises three dimensions: realization, show, and performance. What seems interesting to me is that in the English meaning the notions of show and experience get all mixed up.

Out of the Arts, the word is very much used to define the return of a product, the qualities of a given consumer goods; for example, the performance of the new Honda car. The performance of the Honda employee is also measured in terms of efficiency, efficacy, and effectiveness.

The consumer, on his turn, also fits these values once it participates in the same spirit of profit maximization,

time optimization, and quality enjoyment. People and objects share the same unique spirit of productivity, efficacy, and efficiency.

Thus, a great paradox is conveyed in the term (word), once the artistic performance in its immediacy, ephemeral nature, and extreme corporality keeps in check the serial reproduction, machinery standards, and the consumer logic, that is, the effectiveness–efficacy–efficiency. I do not say that it escapes from the economy of consumption, which would be exaggeration, foolish romanticism, something silly—just take a look at the editorial market, the media, and documental compulsion around “the most ephemeral of the arts,” the consuming clamor around this slogan. The fact is that performance challenges the idea of production and consuming of artistic works when it does not favor the making of the objects as in the visual arts or the theatrical repetition. Of course, what motivates the scenic repetition is the renewal, and each show is really unique, but, even then, it is a flexible type of serialization. Yes, performance has its share of the market, but it searches other forms of insertion, another temporality, and the occupation of other subjective and objective spaces.

I am interested in this virus, this virulence, the bodies, movement’s quality, the dramaturgies that come from this point of view—a point of view that finds habit, the automatic, and the common sense extremely odd. Performance, due to its nature of difficult commercialization and its marginal constitution (margins: occupies a relative space among the arts—visual, performing, film—and, between art and non-art), many times abject (non articulated bodies, taken to extreme psychophysical conditions, poetic brutality), and socially discrepant (multiple sexual forms, fine and grotesque humor, eccentric and ironic existential and corporeal practices) defines itself as a way of resistance, as arguable force, as political force. Performance generates and presents bodies and situations where the contemporary Western normativeness—remarkably consumerist, mechanistic, logocentric, racist, homophobic, out of the body—is thought.

Performance, as I think and practice it, refuses the model efficacy–efficiency–effectiveness since, ultimately, it does not take part in a communication system where the idea of a pre-determined meaning established by the artist prevails. I am interested in the shared creation of meaning as the event takes place, as part of a whole. The performer suggests a motto and initiates a relational space–time; instead of transmitting a determined message, I value the

immediate generation of meaning. It is about relational experiences where subtler forms of communication are at stake.

R: Peggy Phelan advocates the ontological anti-economic aspect of performance emphasizing its non-reproducible quality. Considering the terminological paradox Fordism–Taylorism, how do you perceive the matter of performance and reproducibility, since a lot of information that reaches us about performance art comes from video documentation, photographs, and books/articles, in other words, via reproductions?

Eleonora: Here begins the tasks of the performance scholar, critic or historian, the sensibility to handle an object of study from its specificities, of seeking the dramaturgy that best reveals it. Performance demands a performative act theory; this is what Peggy Phelan suggests and I agree. The fact is that the experimentalism asks for theory practices and equally experimental criticism.

I remember the saying of a German historian from the 19th century, Ranke, who states that the objective of history is “to present the fact as it is”. As if there were unequivocal and transparent relation between the writing and factuality, as if historiography was reproductive and not fundamentally representational. The way I see it, the record, the document, the journalistic commentary or the historical study are representations of facts, ways to access the past via updating and not by reconstitution; dramaturgically, it is possible to show the awareness one has of this maneuver or not.

Therefore, to start with, I do not think that these piles of books, articles, photos, and videos are exactly the reproductions of works because I see in fact the performance, in its radical instantaneity, as something unreproducible. I consider all these forms, deviations of the performance, representations derived from fact–performance that can even come to be other pieces with strong performative tenor as Peggy wants the theoretical text to be. I think that the more the thinker, the video maker, the editor, or the performance photographer shows clearly the representative and non-reproductive tenor of these records—or yet, of these derived documental pieces—, more critical, discursive, editorial, and visual qualities will be achieved.

R: You and André Lepecki establish a dialogue with performance through references to Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Deleuze and Guattari, which seems to be an

influence of New York University that in its program approaches performance art and philosophy. Can you talk about how these philosophical references have influenced American and European performance?

Eleonora: I do not know how to answer that, but I believe André would be the person to ask. He is one of the Performance Studies professors who is more interested in the performance–philosophy relation. I can speak about the influence of philosophy in my work as a performer, of the influence of theory in my practice. In fact, I already started phrasing in an awkward form, once I do not differentiate much between one thing and another. I am used to saying that my PhD has been the performance of the longest duration that I have undertaken and whenever I am writing I face the text as an element that could be part of the next piece. Few things give me more ideas for performances, more inspiration, than a good theoretical text, than a text by Merleau-Ponty or by Wittgenstein. As I feel, the thought reflects back immediately in the body, it goes through like an electrical current—many times while I read I need to dance to see if I have really absorbed it. I do not say “I understood” but I say “I absorbed” what was being read. Each to their own.

R: In the article “What is Performance”, from 2000, you state: “You do a good or bad performance if you accept or not accept the action as a transformative experience”. What do you mean by “transformative” and what is the spectators’ role in this transformation?

Eleonora: This sentence is somehow biblical! (laughing). By transformation, I mean transitory form, “trans–form”, action as a sequence, or simultaneous sequences, of forms, interactions, a set of unstable relations. That one seems biblical and this one seems to come from a cellular biochemistry book! (laughing even more).

Few days ago I wrote about the performer–spectator relation in an article called “performing body, performing state.” I said that the performer activity is not autonomous but relative; the performer is relative to the spectator by reciprocity and by complementarity, I think the spectator is such a central element in the piece as the performer because he/she also performs fundamental functions—the spectator is the biggest variable of the equation—performance, the big referential to perform the program, the enhancer element. The performer is the “starter”, the creator and the channel. Each one doing his/her own role, which are complementary and reciprocal functions. The

action of the spectator of the performance is so central that the word seems to no longer match the fact—even the word “witness” seems insufficient. When the person is asked to occupy and build that moment, when his/her action becomes indispensable, and his/her presence becomes effective, he is a collaborator, a co-creator of the event.

Of course it is necessary to think in terms of scale—there are almost invisible collaborations, subtle transformations, minimum movements, imperceptible reverberations, processes that extend in long duration or, on the other hand, abrupt ruptures, cracklings, paradigm changes—and all the tones between these two extremes. What I find the most interesting is that the contact among people is potentially transforming, that to pay attention to the other is a very powerful thing—and I think it is very good to invest in it.

R: Performances that affirm themselves through self-mutilation and beyond the physical limits like the works of Orlan, Stelarc, Chris Burden and Rudolph Schvartzkogler put on the table issues such as the hybrid body, the reconstructed body, the suicidal body (“the body without organs?”). It seems that the dialogue with pain is very current in performance... How do you perceive this dialogue?

Eleonora: In a book called *The Body in Pain*, the author, Elaine Scarry, points to two immediate reactions before the body in pain: the viewer refuses to see the scene instinctively, looks down, turns the face, and in extreme cases, he/she faints; and, also, becomes dyslexic, loses the speech; that is, the two most immediate forms of access to the world and to the other—sight and speech—are destabilized, interrupted, disturbed. These routine actions of conduct and perception could be disarticulated only through a shock. The sight of pain, the fragility of the human body produces an electrical discharge, something the performer is seeking. Their working material is exactly the cultural rejection to pain. In Western society, pain is something that cannot be felt without the desire not to feel it. It cannot be seen without being rejected. This stirs up the viscera thoroughly. Acting through dislike, acting in discomfort, some contents could emerge and be evaluated.

I think there is also a need for cleansing. Performance was consolidated as a genre after the World War II, after the Hiroshima explosion. This experience of disintegration, of breaking apart, pulverization and massive dismember-

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ment, of idiocy and massive violence, needed to be either digested or vomited. Significantly the performance of the 1960s and 1970s addresses this experience.

Just to complete, I wanted to say that the “spectator” when watching the performance projects the feeling of a determined type of pain; he/she can only identify himself/herself with the type of pain that he/she knows, the pain of an accident, for example, which is very different from what the performer is experiencing.

Adrenalin is a magic anesthetic. The performer is crossing mental and somatic limits; he/she is in an altered state of conscience thanks to full engagement in the program he/she decided to fulfill, in a way that his/her body has another endurance for pain. Ulay and Abramović remark that their work is not about pain but about decision and determination—if the spectator feels nauseated, they feel courage. The overcoming of limits brings feelings of freedom and satisfaction that are incredibly strengthening.

That said, I don't mean to diminish the doings of these actions at all; I am only taking away the pathology of these actions as much as possible, because these actions are radically conscious and studied; I'm taking away the fetish of the masochist character of the projects that, at the end, in the majority of cases, have more to do with the relation courage/fear than with a pleasure/suffering relation.

Nowadays, I do not hear much on performances that work with pain; I hear more about people interested in overcoming resistances, extend psychophysical limits. Of course, these extended actions are painful but maybe they do not cause bleeding. In the 1990s and the 2000s there is a certain irony with this type of dramaturgy. Last year I saw a performance by Guillermo Gómez-Peña where he pretended to iron his face and it was tragicomic.

R: “*Ouvir a loucura estética*” [“To listen to aesthetic craziness”] was one of the indications given in the workshop. References are not a trouble: from Artaud to all the aforementioned performers, this issue was and is there, totally present. But what could be said about the artistic responsibility of the performer in this frontier?

Eleonora: I think I did not say this sentence, I do not see it fitting my mouth, but this is the way you heard me and it interests me.

Well, answering your question: There are the “doses of

caution” recommended by Deleuze and Guattari in *How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?*¹ Without such doses the experience undoes because there will not be an “after the experience”. The prudence is a necessary tension. Without prudence there is no paradox because everything turns into a nonsense uproar, and, without paradox, there is no performance.

R: Many performers seem to refer in their works to a transcendental experience (Abramović, Beuys, Cohen, etc). On the other hand, there is another aspect in performance that lies on its emblematic conceptual characteristic. How does this paradoxical information dialogue in your perspective?

Eleonora: That is what I think: I am a human being, and I was born with a sensitive conscience, or, in other words, with a thinking body. The body is this unique phenomenon: it is solid, thick, gaseous, electric, and liquid. It happens, yes, because the body is one happening. The body happens in changing densities. We are vibrating uninterruptedly. A minimum vibration that reveals the non-stopping changes organically processed as the negotiations of internal and external references. We are in a state of permanent friction with the world and we are the world. We are gifted with multiple capabilities—sensorial, intellectual, physical, psychic, emotional, spiritual, sexual, extra-sensorial, energetic, and all the others I do not know and the ones I forgot that I know—that are dynamically intertwined in a braid of visibilities and invisibilities, materiality and immateriality, flow and quietness. As Espinosa says, we are affected and we affect, we define ourselves by our capabilities of affection. I think performance dedicates itself to thinking this extraordinary “thing” that is to be and to have a body, a body and a context where the body happens; a body in a production circuit of determined types of bodies. The body is transcendental experience and conceptual experience and I do not see why one should give privilege to any of the capabilities in detriment of another if they exist exactly by reciprocity. It is the same I just mentioned about the “spectator” and the performer existing by reciprocity and by complementarity.

R: Regarding the connective tissue,² of which Merleau-Ponty talks about... Are there any groups working with performance through this perspective? We know that in 2003 the Hemispheric Institute Encuentro, which took place in New York, was focused on art and religion, and maybe this can mean a relation; but—if that is possi-



Eleonora Fabião, *Giro*
Photography by Waldir Barreto

ble—out of the mystical experience field, are there groups working from this information?

Eleonora: The work I see better exploring the idea of connective tissue is the series of “relational objects” and the relational actions by Lygia Clark; but here we are talking about ghostly forms of the body and not of mystical experiences. I do not know if Lygia Clark has read Merleau-Ponty. I am just starting my research about her work, I cannot confirm or suppose anything yet. Phenomenology was the currency of the time and she was very well informed and extremely intelligent.

R: “*Turbinar a inteligência das potências*” [“Twirling the intelligence of the potencies”] was an issue raised during the workshop. Can you talk more about that, associating this subject with your performance *Giro Piece*, which was presented during the third Hemispheric Institute Encuentro, in Peru?

Eleonora: I really like this verb—*turbinar*/to twirl—but I do not think I said this sentence. Sorry for being so refined towards the sentences that you mentioned from the workshop, but the thing is, to work the language is fundamental, to make efforts to say what one wants to say with clearness and exactness, is very important.

So, “*turbinar*/to twirl” reminds me of how homeopathic medicine is made, where through spinning, the pharmacist activates this or that component enhancing its effects.

From Bachelard on, both André and I have talked about “twirling metaphors”. Instead of keeping them well settled, literally settled by spoken or written language, I suggest, as other people do, to experience them in the body. And here the example of *Giro* illustrates well what I want to say. After the fall of the World Trade Center—an episode I saw very closely—each time I entered the studio to try something, I felt dizzy, trying to concentrate on my ideas, trying to make sense of this and that. All I really new was how lost I was. I was lost, without direction, dizzy, trying to stay on my feet. Then I started to spin around, spinning longer each time, spinning very differently from the classical ballet dancer who fixes a point in space or the derviche monk who fixes his eyes on his hand. I looked outside, always straight ahead, to a place that does not exist because the spinning is exactly a dismounting of the spatial referential. For me, that was essential. I hurt myself quite a lot in the beginning, but after a certain time, I developed relations of compensation

between the vertical and horizontal lines in a movement that I understood to be a long walk on the same spot. I brought my own bewilderment metaphor to exhaustion. I went down to the last consequences. “I twirled”.

I made two versions of this piece to be performed bare-foot. The street version happened in Largo da Carioca (Rio de Janeiro) next to a high and abstract sculpture by José Resende, with the collaboration of a noisy knife sharpener; The indoor version happened in a gallery in Lima (Peru), where I spun under the threshold of one of the house doors among a heap of black, brown, orange, and blue wires, which conducted the electricity through a very noisy power generator functioning outside the gallery to a number of televisions which were showing four videos made for the event.

R: The importance of the performer’s presence always seems to be a big issue. In the workshop it was said that: “*A atenção acaba com as hierarquias do nosso corpo. Tudo se torna uma potência só.*” [“Attention erases the hierarchies of our body. Everything becomes one single potency.”] How do you understand the relation between presence and attention?

Eleonora: This question is big. I will try to be concise. The quality of the performer’s presence is associated with his/her capability to inhabit the present of the present, the realtime of attention. Attention is a form of sensorial and perceptive connection, a pass of psychophysical expansion without dispersion, a form of knowledge. It concerns a distended state of alert, a relaxed tension that can be experienced when one is paying attention to oneself, to the other and to the environment. Attention allows for the maximum and minimum—quantities that usually escape in daily chores—to be penetrated and explored. Attention deepens (vertically) and amplifies (horizontally) the relations, the bodies, and the “body of the relation”. The “body of the relation” is a field of shared strength that I understand as “presence”. The presence happens among attentive bodies and not in bodies.

R: It seems that the Yugoslavian performer Marina Abramović is a very important reference for you. What about the other strong influences in your practice and in your theoretical work?

Eleonora: Yes, Abramović and Ulay. Yoshi Oida, the Japanese actor established in Paris, is also a very strong reference for me. Pina Bausch is an incredible special artist. Ju-

liana Carneiro da Cunha, Clark, Aderbal and Ivana, too. I recently came to know the work of Matthew Barney and felt greatly impressed. I like to work with André Lepecki and I also like his work very much. Peggy Phelan is a very important reference. Ronaldo Brito, a master. And, without any doubt, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze+Guattari, and Wilhelm Reich are very important.

R: About Lygia Clark... What are the relations between her work and performance?

Eleonora: Lygia Clark did a very good and interesting transition from her work as a visual artist to a therapeutic work. The object goes through several transformations, from two-dimensional and highly visual, with the surface adhered to the wall, to the three-dimensional tactile, handled by the spectator, “Critter” loose on the floor. Later she creates clothes, masks and installations for sensorial experiences widely mobilizing and engaging. Then, there are the propositions for individual and in-group actions, which give way to her work with patients—known as “Structuring the Self”—where Clark applies the “relational objects” on the body of her clients. The use of worthless materials that are powerful sensorial stimulators—plastic bags, elastic, stones, newspapers, pantyhose, water, seeds, shells, sand, styrofoam balls, and onion bags, for instance—is crucial. Hence, we have a threefold metamorphosis happening: of the “artist” herself, in her values and needs; of the “art object” in its attributes and functions; and of the “spectator” who goes through the roles of accomplice, collaborator, and agent.

The relations of this life project with the performance are innumerable. I am not saying that Clark made “performances”—her son, Alvaro Clark, tells us she did not like the terminology, and that she referred to the works with a more performative character as “propositions”. Nevertheless, the central importance that the body starts to have in her work, the radical inclusion of the spectator, as well as the absolute freedom of means and materials, allows one to think about performance in a very rich manner.

Clark is a higher referential because she really pushes the boundaries of art, she opens and fills the hybrid spaces that cannot be classified, demystifies the figure of the artist and the material value of the object. She works to develop the perceptive and creative capabilities of the people, in order to awake their bodies and to expand their consciousness, that is; to increase the quality of life through highly poetic and remarkably relational actions.

R: What do the series *Convergências* [Convergences] and *Operações* [Operations], developed by André Lepecki and you consist in?

Eleonora: These are two projects that ended up having unexpected derivations. I still do not know exactly how to talk about them. The thing is that André and I have thought together and performed works in partnership, as was the case of this workshop in Curitiba and other interventions. These collaborations, in a way can be considered as part of the series “convergences”. But what was previously dreamt about has not been performed yet. It is still on the paper.

R: What about your current projects and artistic perspectives coming back to Brazil?

Eleonora: At this very moment I am obstinately writing my doctorate thesis. I am going to Berlin in June to research and present a series called *Peças Acumuladas* [Accumulated Pieces]. I return to Brazil on the second semester to continue teaching at UFRJ. I am a professor at the Department of Theater Direction, and, from then on, put into practice many performance projects that are being thought in New York to be performed in Brazil. I love the streets of Rio de Janeiro. I also hope to know more about what is happening in terms of performance throughout the country, and to write about this movement, which as I perceive is spreading more and more. To start with, that is it. ♦

[1] DELEUZE, Gilles, e GUATTARI, Félix. “Como Criar Para Si Um Corpo Sem Órgãos” In *Mil Platôs – Capitalismo e Esquizofrenia*, vol. 3. Tradução de Aurélio Guerra Neto, 8–27. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. 34, 1996.

[2] MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice. “O Entrelaçamento – O Quiasma” In *O Visível e o Invisível*, 4a edição. Tradução de José Artur Gianotti e Armando Mora d’Oliveira, 127–150. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2005.

Eleonora Fabião and André Lepecki led the workshop *Performing – A Workshop on Body and Action* at Casa Hoffmann – Centro de Estudos do Movimento, in Curitiba, Brazil, November 24–28, 2003.

Eleonora Fabião is performer, actress, and Assistant Professor of the Department of Communication at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ. She has been working towards her doctorate degree in Performance Studies at the New York University on a CAPES scholarship. In the 1990s she worked in several plays as a member of two theater groups: *Centro de Demolição e Construção do Espetáculo* (directed by Aderbal Freire-Filho) and *KO Produções* (directed by Ivana Leblon). In 2000 she created *Alice*, her first solo piece, performed and directed by herself, in collaboration with the musician Hermeto Pascoal and Waltércio Caldas. Since 2001 she has dedicated her time to the research and creation of performances. She currently develops two new series in partnership with André Lepecki: *Convergências* [Convergences] and *Operações* [Operations].

Elconora Fabião, *Giro*
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